

RADIO.EDU

"College Radio CAN be Fun"

by John Deveck

[BALTIMORE, MD - June 2003] I remember this: The sounds of new music, excited voices, first shows, small concerts – the whole thrill of discovery that cajoled most, if not all, of us to stay in radio. This is college radio! So, while the "real world" has a playlist of 300 songs at best, we have nearly 10,000 in our server and nearly 1,000 CDs in our new library!

OK, it may not be the "real world" experience of being stuffed into a restrictive format, kowtowing to commercial sponsors, promoting lousy bands, and having to voicetrack a station in Iowa from your local Georgia studio, but what the heck, this is fun!

Yeah, this might generate some letters, I usually do. But, consider this – if you had not had that first amazing experience in radio, whether it was getting a phone call from a real listener, or causing arcs in the transmitter, you would not be reading this right now. Think of me as the smiling recruiter; it is never like you are promised in the real world. I am now giving students a chance to experience all the jobs, from DJ to PD, with less hassle and headache; and they even get to play what they want and not what The Consultant said would fit best with their 18-34 female, truck driving, pro-war, anti-troops, average 8 minute listener at 3:45 p.m.

But, I am on the third paragraph and way off track. Please give me a moment to explain how this all happened. [SFX: Cue swirly music and wavy visuals] Let me take you back to what seems like a time long ago: March 2000. I was at another college radio conference – I do three or four a year. As usual, I ended up chatting with lots of people after sessions, trying to help them with planning and tech issues for their stations. I had spent a dozen years as the sales manager and low power "go-to" guy at LPB Communications. I had designed, supplied, installed – or messed up in some way – about a thousand educational stations from licensed FMs to carrier current AMs.

A NEW DIRECTION

I started talking with a fellow from Loyola College in Maryland about their idea to resurrect the defunct college station as a real cornerstone for their Communications Department. The station was the kind many of us remember – behind the stairs, under a leaky drain line, and perpetually under-funded and understaffed. They wanted to get past this and had hired someone to pump up their Radio and TV courses and facilities. The Budget: Well, they were "working on that" and needed some real numbers. I suggested it would take a couple of hundred thousand if they were serious or maybe 20K if not. Those numbers usually send college folks scurrying.

One day he called and said they had a 30' by 60' weight room, that could be used for the station. He asked for a proposed studio layout, so I went to the campus, looked at the space and drew up some basic ideas, not really expecting it to amount to much (I

routinely did dozens of proposals for every one that came to fruition). But, then I got a call asking if I could come to meet with the architects, to discuss their ideas on adjusting my drawings. You can imagine my surprise: "Huh?! You mean you got funding? That much! Wow!" It was time to look at this whole station thing in a new light.

We sat down and began to rework the old free weight room into a radio station. It happened to be the ground floor of a dorm, so it had great student traffic, but also had students above it with basketballs! We started with the dream of all rooms being isolated, soundproofed and interconnected. We considered blowing the side out of the building to reconfigure the windows and doors that were not in line with the radio model. Finally, we had plans for usage in each of the rooms, but quickly discovered we would blow the whole budget just on the construction of our dream space – and Fisher Price radios would not cut it for equipment. Rats!

FROM PLAN TO REALITY

To keep costs under control, the College moved the construction in-house. Initially, this was a concern as most college physical plant folks do not do a lot of sound-critical work. Well, high praise for these guys and my apology for underestimating them! They brought the whole construction package in early and way under budget! It all works, looks great and sounds great. No doubt the detail level of the architects' planning helped, as did the acoustical consultant, but if you are facing a tight construction budget, see if the "local" folks can help.

Careful reworking allowed us to create four rooms, isolated from above and below, with interconnecting windows and sound locks to keep the main room at bay. These four became On Air, Recording A, Production and Recording B, each independent but interconnected.

Isolating the rooms was only part of the battle as we still had to leave room for all the wiring snakes to get from their Engineering home run location to each, without compromising the acoustics. After several meetings on interconnection issues, we found a way to radius pipe into the space above each of the rooms and down inside their walls, giving us good paths and maintaining sound isolation.

In addition to the four studios, the main lobby area doubles as a classroom and triples as a set of three news gathering and production desks.

Budget compromises forced us to leave this space less sound-isolated, so sometimes you hear the water from upstairs pipes (or feel it!), but that only happened twice. A music library space was included to make sure there was a secure location for all the CDs and other operational staff. And an Engineering office was added at the end of the space. It would include all the power panels for the room, home runs

for audio, servers and processing. It would also be long and narrow, but that came after the equipment went in.

So, we had worked out the basic concepts and structures, but had not gotten to the gear and operational functionality of the startup space. They wanted to be able to teach Radio Production and several other classes, in addition to having the students run the station as a club. This meant we had to have a lot of workstations for the class, but also a lot of flexibility in the space to keep classes from interfering with radio operations.

Because of the flexibility demands, all of the studios really needed to be capable of running as On Air in a pinch. Because we had a pretty tight budget for four studios, Engineering, three news desks, and Library, it forced some compromises in equipment choices, but not in functionality. Where the budget did not allow for a bunch of SAS routers, we had to make other ideas work.

A quick tour of the gear selected will show, to many folks surprise, you do not have to have a killer budget to get all this stuff and have it installed. But that list is a whole 'nuther column.

ON THE "AIR"

WLOY does not have a license. Yes, we are small time. But we do everything else. A 100 mW AM transmitter (the first of many) is up and running about a 1/4 mile radius under Part 15. Channel 71 on the campus cable system carries the audio and our own funky PowerPoint show. And, of course, we have two beefy servers for streaming Real Audio and Shoutcast.

Why am I still here? Well, when we finished building the station, they offered. Then they offered again, and finally they sent in Don Corleone (yes, it was an offer I could not refuse!). I must admit, attending NAB and not having to deal with a booth was pretty cool. And going from an hour plus commute to five minutes is pretty neat. But what really makes it worth doing is the students. The first time they hear themselves on the air, the first time they see their own channel on the cable system, the first time they hear the streams, or get a caller on their show – to steal a bit from a commercial: Priceless!

We still have a few things to work out, like schedules, programming, DJs, music, PSAs, underwriting, remotes, money, and all sorts of other insignificant bits. But, a mere two weeks after we went live we held a concert. We have 22 DJ shows, and another dozen in the works. True, we rely on automation more than I would like, but we are growing and we are always "on."

I hope through this column to explore issues in educational radio as well as low power broadcasting. Maybe, just maybe, I will strike a chord and one of you will find this interesting, or educational. We will not know until we try!

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